

The Schenck-Polhemus House
Easton Turnpike Road .
Bridgewater Township, Somerset County, New Jersey

HABS-NJ-524

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, F.A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

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The Schenck-Polhemus House
Easton Turnpike Road
Bridgewater Township, Somerset County, New Jersey

Owner: Calco Chemical Company

Date of Erection: 1803-1810

Architect:

Builder: Either Garret Schenck or John Polhemus

Present Condition: Razed since measured

Number of Stories: Two and one-half in main part;
one and one-half in wing

Materials of Construction: Foundation - stone

Exterior walls - flush
siding on front elevation,
shingles on east elevation
main part, and clapboards
on others

Interior walls - plaster

Inside brick chimneys

Roof - wood shingles

Historical Data:

The 191 acre tract on the southern end of which this early nineteenth century farmhouse was erected is found to have been lot number 3 of the 14 into which the 1400 acre plantation of Cornelius Van Horn was divided in 1786, and was directly north of the river front lot number 1 on which

"Island Farm" house (NJ-525) stands, the two houses until the recent demolition of the former being approached by the same lane from the old Easton Turnpike between Bound Brook and Somerville.

By a deed of 10 March 1786, Jacob Ricketts of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, conveyed to Ravaud Kearney and others of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, for 2133 pounds New Jersey money, Lots numbers 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 12 of the fourteen into which the farm "formerly of Cornelius Van Horne", deceased, had been surveyed, reciting that Ricketts had purchased them from the estate of said Van Horne by deed of 9 February in this same year, and describing lot number 3 as of 191 acres but mentioning no buildings thereon.

Ravaud Kearney of Perth Amboy, the grantee abovesaid, with wife Ann, conveyed by Deed of 10 May 1803 to Garret Schenck of Somerset County (township residence not stated) for 1650 pounds, the lot number 3 of 191 acres, and part of lot number 10 (being some forty-two acres of mountain woodland), "with all and singular the Buildings, fencings" etc. Schenck was the first grantee of this tract who resided in the County and Township in which the farm is situated, a fact which indicates that he built the house between 1803 and 1807. For he, as Garret G. Schenck of Bridgewater Township, Somerset County, and wife Jane, conveyed by Deed of 3 April 1807 to John Polhemus and Daniel Polhemus Jr., both of Franklin Township in same county for \$9500, the two lots abovesaid, with exception of 38 acres already sold off the upper end of number 3. The house surveyed by H. A. B. S. stood at the lower end thereof, on the headland overlooking to the south the lowland which was once a great pond drained by a branch of Cuckold's Brook into Raritan River. Either Schenck or John Polhemus erected this house, its design and details identifying it as of the period of these two transfers in 1803-7. Of the two latter grantees Daniel Polhemus Jr. was still residing in Franklin Township four years later; hence John moved to the farm thus acquired by them.

John Polhemus abovenamed, of Somerset County, having sold some 58 acres off the farm previously, conveyed to his son James Polhemus of same place for \$12,000 by deed of 4 April 1857, the remaining 95 acres including the homestead, reciting his title from Schenck, "and excepting also the use of the north lower room and the north upper room of the dwelling house in the above mentioned homestead farm to the said John Polhemus as long as he desired to occupy the same with his family". He died December 2, 1873, in the township, and supposedly in this house. The difference in the consideration moneys, \$9500 paid for the 153 acre farm in 1807 and \$12,000 for some 95 acres of it in 1857, may indicate the value of a house erected between the two dates and thus ascribe its erection to the elder Polhemus in or soon after his purchase in 1807.

Subsequent transfers were James Polhemus to Lewis H. Taylor of Highbridge, Hunterdon County, 29 March 1875; Taylor to Gordon Chambers of Philadelphia 26 February 1892; Chambers to The Eastern Real Estate Company 10 June 1905; and since then having come into the possession of the Calco Chemical Company; the house was stripped of its finishing woodwork by a dealer in such materials, and the structure demolished in June-July 1939 leaving only the foundation.

The informal design of this house is the one much favored for country homesteads variously throughout New Jersey in several succeeding periods. It consists of a major unit of two stories and garret over an excavated cellar, the entrance stairhall from front to rear exits serving the two living rooms at one side, and the lesser unit being a one story and garret dining and kitchen wing one room deep on the other side of that hall and at a lower level.

Economy in construction and the required location of the open-hearthed kitchen further apart from the living rooms appear to have dictated this L-shaped plan. But greater dignity of mass as well

as of economy in construction and maintenance results from a more compact, four-square house. There is always the possibility in this type of earlier house that the major unit with its two chambers at one side of the wide hall was erected preliminary to future duplication symmetrical on that hall with resulting formality of a mansion house.

In this example, however, the dominating unit of 29 feet front by 34 feet gable end is poorly proportioned, this effect being aggravated by the heavy overhang of the gable cornice. This last feature used instead of the simple verge board common to farmhouses of this and antecedent dates adds some degree of elegance, however, being modillioned at the front and rear eaves. The small "stoep" at the north and the south entrance door is remarkable for the use of a hipped roof instead of a gable.

The finishing woodwork throughout the house exhibits the characteristics of post-Revolution and earliest 19th century detail, a fact which precludes the possibility of the major unit being an annex to an earlier and lesser one. The feature of principal note is the mantelpiece in each of the two living rooms and bedrooms above. Three of these are composed of a pilaster at each side of the fireplace and carrying the molded mantel shelf, while the fourth consists of a molded trim on the inner line of the plain fascia surrounding the opening and carrying a dentilled shelf. The height

of ceilings, the use of chair-rail and wood cornice in the absence of panelled wainscot, and the hardware all are typical of early 19th century work.

Bibliography:

Somerset County deed books E-9, C-651, E-223, Z-2-313, V-4-498, etc.

Field books and drawings of the Survey

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Supervising Historian

Approved:

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